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Journey Into South Of Here

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Journey Into South Of Here

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Abstract

The rain came down in a September mist enclosing my train-seat world, shutting me off from the rest of the car, empty except for an elderly couple sitting far behind me...

about Baron, she'd blame him. "He never runs away from me," she'd say.

"If she starts nagging, I'll just tell her to shut up." He smiled at the idea and opened the door.

Martha looked up from the pan of dirty dishes to her bedraggled husband.

George stared at the floor and scratched at it with his toe.

"George," she exclaimed, "where have you been?"

"I . . . errr . . . Baron ran away."

At that moment Baron walked into the room. He looked at his wet, frail master and yawned. Carefully, he stretched, yawned again, and lay down.

George stared at the dog, blankly, and looked questioningly at his wife.

"He's been home for half an hour," she stated.

George flushed and looked back to the floor.

"Which," she continued, "is more than I can say for you. Honestly George, sometimes I . . ."

—Charles Hendrickson, *P.Vet., Jr.*



Journey Into South Of Here

THE rain came down in a September mist enclosing my train-seat world, shutting me off from the rest of the car, empty except for an elderly couple sitting far behind me. The mist collected into droplets on the outside of the double safety-glass window, and the droplets oozed toward each other, catching at the specks of grime, engulfing and carrying them along in grey streaks.

I focused my eyes on the shapes moving outside the window, and they composed themselves into a great mass of people hurrying toward the cars ahead of mine. I watched with a kind of fascinated interest. Great crowds of colored people were a new experience. I wondered vaguely if I

should move back and sit in front of the “nice white couple,” as my mother would have called them. But our car remained empty, even though the extra Labor Day coach had pulled out for Memphis a few minutes before, leaving all the extras to be piled into the second section.

The train pulled slowly out of Chicago, past the dirty tenements that matched the rain. I was still staring out the window, where the scenery hadn’t varied from the dirty-grey brick buildings swathed with Patosi Beer signs and dingy washings, when we pulled up to a platform where the sign and conductor announced simultaneously, “Chicago Heights.” I turned my head just enough to see the couple struggling with their packages as they stood up to leave.

And then the people waiting on the platform filled the car. Some were the color of creamed coffee, some an ebony black, and the rest filled in all the shades ranging in between. The car became more and more crowded. Negroes roamed up and down the cars looking for seats. But the seat beside me remained empty. And I kept my face toward the window.

As the train left the world of grey washings and sagging brick buildings behind, and moved south toward the open Illinois fields, I thought of what my mother would say if she could have seen the crowded car with its one white occupant, all alone in a seat. I decided that it didn’t matter. I decided to be liberal, and generous, and kind to my brothers-under-the-skin. I looked up at the young woman slowly moving down the aisle, a suitcase in each hand. She looked nice enough.

“Here’s an empty seat,” I said.

She looked at it, looked at me, and moved on down the aisle. I sat there, not knowing what to think. And I turned toward the window again. I didn’t want to meet the eyes of the people around me. I knew they had heard.

The train rolled on. Illinois passed by my window, the farm houses growing smaller and the corn more shrunken and drought-dried.

The seat in front of me was occupied by two young women, one wearing an orange-red scoopneck dress and gold hoops in her pierced ears, the other a creamy tan color with a fitted tweed wool suit. The woman in the red dress left

her place and it was taken by an elderly man whose hair reminded me of Uncle Remus — cut in a kinky, close cropped butch, and snow white. He wore a square-cut ring with an authentic-looking diamond in it. And his suit had obviously been tailored.

"Yes, I have a business in New Orleans," floated back to me. "I've just been to Chicago for my yearly check-up."

"I work in New Orleans too," the girl replied. "I'm a secretary in a law office. But it's taken me three years to work up. I don't mind though, because I'm sure I would be hired almost anywhere now, for my experience. But it hasn't always been this way."

Through the rest of Illinois, across the river at Cairo, and through a tiny bit of Kentucky I sat alone in my seat, wanting lunch badly, but afraid someone would take my seat if I left, and even more afraid to ask someone to save it for me. And there I sat, in my little world surrounded by a white linen head rest and a double safety glass window and a long rubber matted aisle.

It was in the middle of Tennessee somewhere when the little boy came over. My knitting needles seemed magnetized, and he drew closer and closer.

"Hi," I said. "What's your name?"

"Jackie," he drawled.

"Where are you going, Jackie?"

"To Memphis, to see Aunt Pearl."

His mother sitting a few seats ahead looked up. She catapulted out of her seat, down the aisle, and grabbed him by the hand dragging him back to her seat, all in one motion.

"Didn't I tell you 'stay way from them white people? I told you once already what they do when they catch a little black boy. You be careful now."

She glanced back at me to see if I'd heard, a look of I-hope-that-was-loud-enough on her face.

It had been quite enough. I turned to watch the approach into Memphis. Cotton patches were broken by occasional spaces containing a shack with nothing but a footpath leading to it. Passing one with a '36 Ford beside it, I wondered if they drove it out using the railroad tracks.

The train crossed the Mississippi again on a high bridge that curved itself directly into the down-town dis-

trict. It slowed going past the backs of department stores, and came to a shuddering halt. I stayed in my seat, not standing up, nervously arranging and rearranging my purse and hat on my lap, until the car had completely cleared. Then I stood up to leave. As I stepped from the train onto the raised second-floor platform, a theater across the street from the station caught my eye.

Just below the marquee was a large sign painted on the bricks of the building in yellow block letters — “Colored Entrance To The Rear.” I was back in the world again.

—*Anne Burnett, Sci., Jr.*



It is midsummer now
When even the greens turn
Hot
Shiny shimmery intense green
Cornfields
Passing warm whispers
Field to field

Trees in the hot wind
Black-green flames
A summer-faded butterfly
Is consumed in the flicker of leaves

The dusty roadside and farmhouse grass
Lie green-gray ashes

I rise from the hammock
And the green hotness circles;
I spin
In the deep green heat of summer

— *Alberta Moellering, H. Ec. Ed., Jr.*